

## Mocking the Master: Early Responses to The Sacred Fount

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Existing bibliographical studies provide extensive information about the reception of The Sacred Fount (1901) but it is now possible to extend our knowledge of the early responses to James's most controversial and enigmatic novel. In Henry James: The Critical Heritage (1968), Roger Gard reprinted an unsigned review of The Sacred Fount in the Spectator, a review by Cornelia Atwood Pratt in the New York *Critic* and a review by Harry T. Peck in the U.S. Bookman. In 1975, Beatrice Ricks gave publication details of these and seventeen other reviews of The Sacred Fount in Henry James: A Bibliography of Secondary Works. James W. Gargano reprinted the Peck review and added unsigned reviews from the Pall Mall Gazette, The Times and the Edinburgh Review in Critical Essays on Henry James: The Late Novels (1980). In 1982, Linda J. Taylor listed and provided excerpts from almost forty notices and reviews of The Sacred Fount in Henry James, 1866–1916: A Reference Guide. In Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews (1996), Kevin J. Hayes reprinted the Pratt review and the review in The Times alongside fourteen previously unreprinted reviews. Hayes also listed a further twenty-three reviews of The Sacred Fount. Finally, in 2000, Robin Hoople listed over thirty reviews of The Sacred Fount in In Darkest James: Reviewing Impressionism, 1900–1905. To date, then, a total of nine notices and forty-six reviews of The Sacred Fount in Britain and the United States have been identified.<sup>1</sup> The present article reprints selected text from two reviews (1901) as well as the complete text of three literary skits (1901–2), a parody (1904) and a 1905 letter published in the New York Times. All of these pieces appeared in

the United States; all are reprinted here for the first time since their original publication. Even when hostile or mocking, these uncollected works have much to say about James's position within the transatlantic literary marketplace at a moment in his career when, according to Michael Anesko, "latent contradictions" between James's "relatively inflated value as cultural capital and his correspondingly depressed value as a saleable commodity" became increasingly evident (192).

Francis Marion Crawford's review of The Sacred Fount in the New York Journal and Advertiser appeared on 9 Feb. 1901, on or shortly after publication of the novel in the United States by Charles Scribner's Sons. This review has not previously been identified. Yet it is important because it is, in one sense, unique. Another and much closer friend of James, William Dean Howells, discussed The Sacred Fount at some length in "Mr Henry James's Later Work" (1903); but this piece in the North American Review, published alongside the first instalment of The Ambassadors, was an essay rather than a review. Crawford's piece on The Sacred Fount – he claimed to have obtained "an advance copy" – is the only known review of the novel by a member of James's circle. The author of numerous popular romances, Crawford first met James in the 1870s when the latter visited the Odescalchi palace in Rome, then the residence of Crawford's uncle, Luther Terry. Towards the end of his trip to Italy in 1899, James visited Crawford in Sorrento and described him as "a prodigy of talent – and of wealth!" (qtd. in Edel 286).

Howells claimed in his 1903 essay to have "mastered the secret" of The Sacred Fount – but then refused to share it (36). In a similar vein, Crawford found the novel to consist of "problems" rather than a "solution." For Crawford, The Sacred Fount would appeal to those in search of "intellectual" rather than "ordinary" enjoyments. Yet to identify the "intellectual" aspects of the novel involved drawing attention to

the “ordinary” qualities it lacked. Crawford acknowledged that The Sacred Fount had no “quickly-moving story” and little character development: “when we have reached the end all the characters [...] are in very much the same situations as those in which we found them at the outset” (8). These were exactly the qualities other reviewers found objectionable.

Like Howells’s essay, Crawford’s review was the fruit of personal knowledge and a fellow-writer’s interest in technique. But although the tone was warm, the review in the Journal and Advertiser was not especially acute, consisting mainly of plot summary and a 500-word quotation from The Sacred Fount which Crawford pronounced “admirable.” In any case, Crawford’s sympathetic response was unusual: other reviews were overwhelmingly negative, and Tony Tanner has suggested that the publication of The Sacred Fount marked “the second really low point in James’s reputation during his own lifetime” (the first came after the publication of The Bostonians in 1886) (14–15). Yet adverse criticism of The Sacred Fount communicates a much clearer sense of the stakes in a wider cultural “struggle” (to adopt the Bourdieusian terms proposed by Anesko) than the somewhat faint praise offered by Crawford. And, while it echoed the criticisms made available to us in the work of Gard, Gargano and Hayes, the other review reprinted here for the first time also offers new insights. This review was written by the drama critic of the Boston Daily Advertiser, Henry Austin Clapp (1841–1904) and appeared in this journal on 23 Feb. 1901. Many of the reprinted reviews object to James’s style, but Clapp’s remarks on slang, word order, collocation and syntax in The Sacred Fount had an unusual technical precision. It has previously been suggested that Wilson Follett was the first critic to see The Sacred Fount as a self-parody, and it is true that in 1936 he described the novel as “a practical joke, and a merciless self-portrait” (12).<sup>2</sup> But the

notion that The Sacred Fount was some kind of joke had already, albeit less sympathetically, been entertained in reviews of the novel (see Hayes 342, 345, 347 and 356). Clapp's review appeared on the same day as the earliest of these reprinted reviews and began by asking whether James had written The Sacred Fount "deliberately to parody himself, as it were, or rather to exhibit himself reduced to his worst terms ... in order to see how much the public will bear?" (8). Here again, James was presented as a writer at loggerheads with average readers.

Hostile criticism of James's later works, and particularly of The Sacred Fount, frequently made use of elaborate or exotic images of disproportion for satirical effect. For Rebecca West in 1916, the sentences of The Sacred Fount were as "vast as the granite blocks of the Pyramids" whilst the actual story was only the size of "a hen-house" (107). A year earlier, H. G. Wells probably had The Sacred Fount in mind when he described James as "a magnificent but painful hippopotamus resolved ... upon picking up a pea" (108). But Wells and West were by no means the earliest critics to make use of such figures. Hayes reprints reviews which imagine the James of The Sacred Fount as a juggler or builder of card houses (see 338, 343–4). Clapp was even more elaborate in his mockery, comparing the novel to a pantomime act in which "there were the muscular movements of locomotion without the slightest progress" and concluding that the experience of reading The Sacred Fount was like pursuing "a pack of slow phantom sleuth-hounds over hill, over dale" only "to be informed ... that there was no fox at all" (8). Yet a passage like this might be read against the grain. In a transfer of rhetorical energy which parallels James's own motif of the sacred fount, Clapp and others drew imaginative energy from The Sacred Fount even as they sought to belittle it.

Several early responses to The Sacred Fount did not take the form of the traditional review. In a 1901 piece published in the New York Critic, the anthologist and detective story writer Carolyn Wells (1862–1942) made fun of The Sacred Fount in verse. The humour here was affectionate: Wells was “really very fond of James,” though she felt that in The Sacred Fount he had “out-Jamesed himself,” giving her “the James-jams, a very bad attack!” (404). “Verbarium Tremens” was pure doggerel, but it struck a chord with one commentator. In June 1901 “Penelope” reprinted the poem in her “Omaha Letter” to “Eleanor.” Penelope’s column in the Lincoln, NB Courier was full of chatty, flowery writing, but it also had perceptive things to say about James and the wider cultural marketplace. Discussing the literary interests of working women, Penelope decried the “era of realism” and – she must have been one of the earliest readers of Sister Carrie (1900) – the pessimism of Theodore Dreiser. For her, the “morbid, problematic novel of late years” led to “literary indigestion.” But there was “no relief” in the “mystic maze” of The Sacred Fount (9–10).

Considerable sophistication is also in evidence in a third skit which makes reference to The Sacred Fount, Truman Robert Andrews’s “Mr Pickley and the Nacherl Novel,” which appeared in the Richmond, VA Times on 11 May 1902. Andrews’s piece has Mr Pickley conducting literary analysis in folksy dialect, using the example of a man with a moustache walking down a street. If Mr Pickley doesn’t notice the moustache, “that’s natcherlism;” if the moustache is painted blue and therefore “strikin’ unreal ... [t]hat’s a histor’cal novel.” Mr Pickley then proposes a third scenario:

“Then s’pose I met him with one side of his moustache turned up an’ t’ other side turned down, indicatin’ t’ he’s troubled with idees o’ some sort only I can’t guess

what in tunket he's drivin' at; that's a psytchiological novel, like th' one you was a-tryin' to flounder through t' other day; that Holy Well bus'ness."

Mr Pickley's wife interjects:

"'Twan't th' Holy Well ... 'twas Th' Sacred Fount."

Mr Pickley is undeterred by this correction:

"Wal, what's th' difference? It might 'a ben a Sinful Waterin' Trought fer all you could git out of it." (20)

So, the humour in published responses to the later works of James was not always motivated by hostility. Max Beerbohm's parodies of James – "The Mote in the Middle Distance" (1912) and "The Guerdon" (1925) – are friendly, even admiring ones, though neither seems to take The Sacred Fount as a model. Beerbohm's caricatures are also well known: one of them has James crouching outside the door of a hotel room, pondering two pairs of footwear – one male, the other female – which stand in the corridor.<sup>3</sup> The immediate occasion for this drawing was a 1904 essay in which James commented on Gabriele d'Annunzio's presentation of "sexual passion" as "the act of a moment," something with "no more dignity than ... the boots and shoes that we see, in the corridors of promiscuous hotels, standing, often in double pairs, at the doors of rooms" (FW 942). Beerbohm turned the joke on James by placing him in precisely the position he found undignified, though Leon Edel felt that the caricature evoked "the mental detective narrator of The Sacred Fount" (324).

By 1904, The Sacred Fount had already inspired more than one imitation.<sup>4</sup> Edmund Wilson claimed that Owen Seaman's 1902 parody of The Sacred Fount marked the point at which James finally became "unassimilably exasperating and

ridiculous” to the general reader (180). Seaman’s use of a first person narrator whose interest in sexual matters is that of an observer rather than a participant suggests that he was thinking in part of the narrator in The Sacred Fount. The stylistic jokes in this piece – the narrator talks about “faculties of discriminative volition;” he has “an interval of recrudescence deliberation;” he alerts us to “considerations of a high sociologic interest” – are also reminiscent of The Sacred Fount (133–34). But although Seaman’s parody of The Sacred Fount may well have been the first, it was not the last. M. Nesbit’s “The Fountain Pen” is reprinted here for the first time since its original publication in the New-York Daily Tribune on 3 Apr. 1904.

The final item reprinted here was first published in the New York Times on 5 Aug. 1905 and is the third known discussion in print of The Sacred Fount by somebody who knew James. Unlike Howells and Crawford, however, Daniel H. Chamberlain (1835–1907) can hardly be described as a member of the James circle. One of James’s fellow-students at Harvard Law School in the 1860s, Chamberlain went on to become Governor of South Carolina (1874–77) and Professor of Constitutional Law at Cornell University (1883–97). Chamberlain reported that he had read all of James “until somewhat recently.” At The Sacred Fount, however, he “drew the line.” The novel was “a tissue of meaningless sentences,” a case of “intellectual flatulence.”

I suggested at the outset that the pieces reprinted in the present article shed light on a struggle within the wider literary field. It might be argued that criticism of The Sacred Fount, which often appealed to “traditional” literary values (developmental plot lines, narrative closure, relative transparency of meaning), can be seen as an early response to literary modernism and that what we see in these pieces are signs of the emergence of a populist, mainstream position on one side of Andreas Huyssen’s “great divide.” But the varying emotional register of these reactions, which range

from disappointment to disgust, suggest that the real picture is a more complicated one. Commentators in 1901 often saw James as the member of a literary elite whose other leading member was William Dean Howells; light-hearted irreverence was frequently employed in the name of a democratic and commonsensical aesthetic, but at the same time James was also singled out for his use of slang – precisely what one might expect mass cultural critics to accept and a canonical author to avoid. The cultural field in this case was a transatlantic as well as a national one, and the engagement between realism and modernism did not exclude consideration of other literary currents including naturalism, psychological realism and symbolism. There were celebrants and detractors, idolizers and iconoclasts. James may not have been aware that readers in the United States had taken to mocking the master; only a minority of those readers seem to have sensed that James thought of The Sacred Fount as a “joke” (HJL 4:186).

I have omitted plot summaries by James’s reviewers, indicating where this has been done. I have excluded long quotations from The Sacred Fount, indicating where I have done so and providing page references to the first British edition of the novel (London: Methuen & Co., 1901). Typographical errors have been silently amended and punctuation standardized. Brief explanatory notes have been provided.

F. Marion Crawford. “The Sacred Fount, a New Novel by Henry James: An Intellectual Problem without a Solution – From an Advance Copy.’ Journal and Advertiser (New York). 9 Feb. 1901: 8.



In The Sacred Fount Mr Henry James presents one of those problems in the treatment of which he is without a rival, but which, as in the present case, do not necessarily admit a solution. The charm of such a book lies not in the incidents of a quickly-moving story, nor in emotions roused in the reader by what are called “strong situations.” The enjoyment is of a far more subtle and recondite nature, for it consists in measuring our wits with those of the writer in order to follow him through the intricacies of the analysis which he carries on from first to last by means of apparently artless conversation.

When we have reached the end all the characters of the book are in very much the same situations as those in which we found them at the outset, and a discontented reader of romantic fiction, or of the modern purpose novel, might complain that he had wasted his time and had failed to be amused. Fortunately there are plenty of readers who can enjoy something very different. Intellectual enjoyment is surely above the ordinary amusement afforded by every-day reading.

[After summarizing the plot, Crawford provides an extended example of James’s “matchless conversation” from MSF 31, l. 9 to 34, l. 18.]

This is admirable.

The Sacred Fount is the mysterious spring whence the young man of the story draws his knowledge of things, his wit and his geniality – a source of all intellectual good things.

One laughs after reading certain books, one is sad after reading others, and some leave one indifferent: but when one lays down Mr James's last novel, if one has understood it, one takes to thinking. Are any of us intellectual vampires, feeding upon obscurely clever friends? Or are some of us the victims, drained of our cleverness, bled to the drain of our wits by some unknown monster who is getting credit for what we might have done?

That is the question. It may never be answered, but we cannot help congratulating the author upon the way in which he has asked it.

Henry Austin Clapp. Review. Daily Advertiser (Boston, MA). 23 Feb. 1901: 8.

No person in the world, of any mature age whatsoever, of either sex, or of any previous condition of servitude to Mr Henry James's genius, can read that novelist's latest production without experiencing a sensation disagreeably mixed of amazement, consternation and irritation. The Sacred Fount is the title of the thing, which is neither a story nor an essay, and may, perhaps, be denominated a psychologic sketch. The reviewer submits, with entire seriousness, the query whether Mr James has not undertaken in this volume to play some sort of audacious trick upon his public. Is it not conceivable that, in pursuance of a scheme, whose result has been the subject of a wager in an English country house, he has written a book deliberately to parody himself, as it were, or rather to exhibit himself reduced to his worst terms, with his virtues diminished and his faults enlarged, in order to see how much the public will bear?

The Sacred Fount is, at all events unique, a curio, a literary prodigy without precedent. Its name is to be first noted. A title more ingeniously inexpressive cannot be imagined.

[Clapp summarizes the plot.]

Will the reader believe upon any testimony except that of his own eyes, that this tomfoolishness is the entire material out of which the 320 pages of the novel are spun? Possibly he will so believe, and will, likewise, retort upon the reviewer the observation that Alfred De Musset, and De Maupassant, Hawthorne, Mr James himself, and many other clever writers have so dealt with whimsies no more substantial than this as to produce works of enchantment – Hispanian castles of beauty, upon whose towers and battlements the light of fancy loves to linger and play. But the present Mr James! His “sacred fount” does not run two consecutive drops of any drinkable liquor – does not run at all, indeed. The alleged “law” is stated and re-stated, and every now and then the observer harks back to “the sacred fount.” And the rest is conjecturing, prattling, prating, spying of the observer, and the various men and women whom he takes partially into his confidence. It is the weakest example of the game of “Button, button, who’s got the button?”<sup>5</sup> Have we caught Mrs Server? Is Brissenden her flame? No, it is Long! Well, perhaps not. Why not Obert, the artist, who painted her lovely portrait? And Long! Oh, yes! We have spied him en tête-a-tête with Mrs Brissenden. Is she then the one who has made him great? No, of course not, since the guilty one must be down in the depths, being “the sacred fount” which is filling his veins with vital fluid. Then it is Mrs Server, of

course, inasmuch she is all in the dumps. And, besides, there is a certain Lady John, whose hard, strenuous brilliancy requires to be explained; perhaps she is one of the guilty pipes that tap some “sacred fount.” And the Brissendens? Do they explain each other, who knows? That seems almost impossible, since they are married, yet “poor Briss,” at least, is so much more in love with his wife that his down-at-the-heel condition may be thus accounted for. And possibly some other depleted wretch accounts for Mrs Briss.

This thimble-rig game<sup>6</sup> might be interesting, if anything ever led to anything or came of anything. But when the matter of the text was catalogued just now, the reader was not informed of the fact that nine-tenths of it is devoted to the observer’s communings with himself, to his speculations, his cross-speculations, his speculations upon his speculations, and his speculations on his speculations upon his speculations. There is no action at all, and no advance even in the theories. It is like the once famous performance of Fox, the pantomimist,<sup>7</sup> wherein there were the muscular movements of locomotion without the slightest progress. As one reads, he begins to doubt his own sanity or the author’s. Whole pages are like Alice in Wonderland, transposed into prose by a cunning litterateur. You think you see an idea; it disappears; again it appears and you think you have it by the tail. But it eludes you and vanishes round a corner or into space; then you are relieved by the apparition of a thought which is slowly, faintly defining itself; you stare at it, and presently discover that it is an impalpable ghost through which the wall is visible. And at the bottom of a page you often wake up to a definite conviction that the previous fifty lines have contained less thought than would properly go to the furnishing of two sentences of moderate length. Hamlet ought to have The Sacred Fount in his hands when he replies to the question of Polonius, “What do you read

my lord?"<sup>8</sup> The insignificance of it all is exceeded only by its tiresomeness. If carving of extreme minuteness is to be of any worth it ought to be done on ivory or metal, not on wood shavings.

The conscientious reader may like to try a sample. Here is one, which might be matched by fifty others: a line from Lady John, then a page of the observer's comment.

[Clapp quotes *MSF* 172, l. 5 – 173, l. 17.]

As for the style, it is generally terrible. Of course, it would not be Mr James's if it did not have splendidly lucid intervals, if it had not always an air – an atmosphere – of serene, refined, conscious distinction. But it is another display of that very bad manner which the novelist seems determined to insist upon, as if he were resolved to alienate his warmest admirers. Its mode in the collocation of phrases is frequently intolerable. The rules of English composition would have to be remade if Mr James's present writing were taken as a standard. Attention was called in this column some months ago to his trick of separating by long modifying clauses two predicate verbs, which ought to be riveted together, and that he plays the game of divorce even between the main verb and the auxiliary. The Sacred Fount offers many examples of these vicious tricks. Another of Mr James's new fads, which is full of bale and strangeness, is to follow French idioms in the formation of his sentences. Mr Chamberlin<sup>9</sup> has called attention to this, especially to the novelist's recently acquired Gallic mode of relating personal pronouns to governing verbs, and adverbs to adjectives. The author goes even further, and without apology, makes his character

say: “Don’t I make things of an ease? Don’t I make life of a charm for it?”; and in the observer’s person remarks that “Mrs Brissenden’s look was of the least accommodating,” and that “what had begun to fade away came back with a vividness.”<sup>10</sup> All of which is bad enough. But is pardonable in comparison with such phrases as “It evidently, too, what I said, gave her pleasure;” or “That was so disconcertingly what he had become,” or “I’m afraid I can’t say what after that I at first did.”<sup>11</sup> These things and a hundred other such from the pen of a man of wide repute as once a master of English!

The worst feature of the sketch is yet to be indicated. In the final eighth of the volume, the whole flimsy structure is smashed to flinders, and the reader is presented with the idea – if there really is any idea in the general obfuscation – that the observer is “crazy,”<sup>12</sup> has been labouring under an obsession, the victim of an idée fixe. It seems that all the supposed discoveries were mistakes, and that there is no “sacred fount” at all in any of the breasts into which it was sought to peer. There is certainly a drop of comfort in this dose, since it reassures one of his own mental soundness. No wonder it was not easy or agreeable to follow the lucubrations of a lunatic!

But the effrontery of it! To be dragged at the tail of a pack of slow phantom sleuth-hounds over hill, over dale, through bush, through briar, and to be informed at the weary, muddy finish that there was no fox at all, not even so much as a herring or an anise-seed bag! Mr Howells, speaking from the Easy Chair of Harper’s Magazine, with the assurance of tone appropriate to one who announces doctrine ex cathedra [...] has informed the public that Mr James has achieved in his latest stories the supreme feat of “finding himself.”<sup>13</sup> A majority of the novelist’s plainer readers, however, will be united in the hope that the self which he has recently found may

soon be lost and lost forever, and its place again possessed by that strong artistic personality, which at its instants of most delicate fineness was incapable of triviality.

Carolyn Wells. "Verbarium Tremens." Critic 38 (New York). May 1901: 404.

FOR assistance, gentle CRITIC, to your pages I repair,  
 There's discussion on the carpet, there's dissension in the air;  
 'Tis a most mysterious screed concerning which I am in doubt,  
 Can you tell what Henry James's latest novel is about?  
 Can you help me as I blindly and precariously mount  
 To the dizzy heights of diction cragging round The Sacred Fount?  
 And are you of a certainty what could have been amiss  
 With the ultra-inner consciousness of pretty Mrs Briss?  
 Or what the vague ineptitude of ecstasy<sup>14</sup> may mean  
 When the torch of an analogy<sup>15</sup> lights visions crystalline?  
 And why the intellectually intimate agree  
 Exemption from intense obsessions useless seems to be?  
 Now the mystifying marvel of this analytic chat  
 Is that the very speakers don't know what they're driving at.  
 The characterless characters are beautifully fine  
 In their psychologic amplitude of action and design,  
 But when Mrs Briss was silent – this is what I want to know –  
Why for several soulful seconds did she fairly hold the blow<sup>16</sup>  
 In sustained detachment quavering while she focussed the intens-

Ification of abysmal and maniacal suspense?

I'm really very fond of James, I willingly agree

For doing parlor tricks with words his equal may not be.

'Tis nothing short of marvellous, the way he slings his ink,

But in this latest book he has out-Jamesed himself, I think.

The mad gush of The Sacred Fount is ringing in my ear,

Its dictional excitements are obsessing me, I fear.

For its subtle fascination makes me read it, then, alack,

I find I have the James-jams, a very bad attack!

"Penelope." "Omaha Letter." Courier (Lincoln, NB). 22 June 1901: 9–10.

Dear Eleanor:

It must be quite half an hour since I seated myself by this window, which opens to the west, with some scraps of paper in my lap and the familiar blue stump of a pencil with its useful rub at the end, held listlessly in my fingers.

I have been thinking! Don't let the printer omit that exclamation mark. It is intended to stand for all necessary surprise and all the funny things that might be said in regard to such a strenuous proceeding on my part. There! I have unloaded my mental distress in the use of that word. If you will show me a book where that adjective<sup>17</sup> fails to appear on about every third page, I will show you a book of the old school. Novelists, critics, book reviewers, in fact every devotee of the pen or pencil, uses it, nay revels in it. It supplies a long-felt want. Evidently our books, our plays, our recreations, our very thoughts are strenuous. I do not wonder at its popularity. It



is a fine, strong, sonorous word. I only wonder how we ever managed to do without it.

It is difficult for me to realize, in this quiet, changeless little den of mine – which is always the same, save that the chintz curtains come home from the cleaners a trifle less strenuous in color each season – that life has become such a complicated, high pressure affair, so difficult to analyze, so often impossible to understand. The era of realism, from which I very truly hope we are emerging, has thrown such a pessimistic hue over everything that I hardly wonder over the number of people who, growing weary over the contemplation of the phases of life, all tagged with that hopeless, “What’s the use,” deliberately sit down to a meal of “Rough on Rats,”<sup>18</sup> or closing up every exhaust in their rooms, turn on the gas<sup>19</sup> without the slightest consideration, perhaps with no thought for the people whose metre will do the registering.

We, as a people, are certainly in an unhealthy state, mentally, neurotic – that is another find of someone, who has placed us under great obligation thereby. If a case has been diagnosed and a disease declared, isn’t it supposed to be good practice to look for the cause?

Now, I am much inclined to blame to a large extent the omnivorous novel reading of today. There is such a tremendously large class of women nowadays to whom life offers very little legitimate distraction. So many pretty, well-educated girls, who for the lack of means on their parents’ side, are condemned to a monotonous life at home, without the trips to seashore and mountain resorts which annihilate the terror of summer heat for others. Debarred from balls, teas and luncheons in winter because they cannot have the trappings necessary to such a life, or quite as often because they must early go into the market place and join the hustling, striving

crowd in its wage-earning contest. There are younger children at home, who must be reared and educated. And the girl of today feels scarcely less keenly than the boy, that she must contribute her share toward the maintenance of the family. This necessity bars her from the portal over which the satin-shod feet of the 400<sup>20</sup> gaily trip into the fascinating game of society.

These girls feel bitterly that they are quite as well fitted by nature and education to join this silken-clad, honey-fed, rose bedded throng, as many of those whom fickle fortune as better favoured.

[“Penelope” expands on her theme.]

These are the novel readers! Novels provide their relaxation, their recreation; they supply all the glow, color and revelry which their lives lack. It would be impossible to turn out the monthly grist in large enough quantities to satisfy their thirst. They become exalted with a literary intoxication, which is a very subtle form of dissipation. This is why I maintain that the morbid, problematic novel of late years is a menace.

It gives to girls an entirely wrong impression of the relation of the sexes. It raises a false standard of womanhood. It engenders a mental stigmatism, so that life, as it is, is out of focus. I read an article somewhere a day or two ago which suggested that the apotheosis of this strenuous modern life of ours had been reached, and that a reaction was not unlikely.

[Penelope again expands on her theme.]

Having been somewhat under the weather since I wrote you last, I have been devouring the novels which the writers of today seem to conceive and run off in the thousands by machinery, and shoot by machinery into the outstretched hands of the waiting public.

I have literary indigestion, and the market offers me no relief, but only throws more material in my way, trusting to the known absence of will on my part of a gourmand to dispose of it. My last venture was a plunge into Henry James's Sacred Fount.

If any one will arise and tell me what he means! What has he against us that he should deliberately lure us into a mystic maze and leave us there, without one single silken thread of connected thought to lead us out?

Perchance he got mad at our fathers, but it is unworthy of him to wreak his vengeance on us. You should read what Carolyn Wells says about it. I enclose her poem cut from The Critic, lest you should not have seen it. It is too clever for you to miss.

[“Penelope” gives the text of Carolyn Wells’s “Verbarium Tremens.”]

Forgive me, Eleanor! It is positively inexcusable to waste postage on such ravings as this embodies. Why are people so merciless toward their friends? I impose on you just because, as Gertrude inelegantly expresses it, “I know you’ll stand for it.” When I

refused strawberries at dinner tonight, mother said she thought I needed a tonic; I believe I do.

If you read the newspapers, you know what to take for that “tired feeling.”

Yours as always,

PENELOPE.

Truman Robert Andrews. “Mr Pickley and the Nacherl Novel.” Times (Richmond, VA). 11 May 1902: 20.

“Beats all how folks is jes’ a-goin’ crazy over these Eben Holden-David Harum<sup>21</sup> kind o’ novels,” remarked Mr Pickley, laying down his paper for a moment, and proceeding to polish his spectacles on a corner of the table cover.

“Folks is jes’ like horned critters,” suggested Mrs Pickley; “they all hafter run in a bunch.”

“No” objected the philosopher; “I don’t guess it’s ezackly that. I think it’s the natcherlism o’ them kind o’ tales. They’re so perfectly natcherl, jes’ like what we’ve all saw and heard, that they slip right down easy.”

“Jes’ like sugar-coated pills,” again suggested Mrs Pickley.

“Ezackly,” replied Mr Pickley, pleased to find his “pardner” in an amenable mood; “ezackly. You don’t hafter go to work to imagine strange times, an’ a strange country, an’ strange people, an ‘Sakermints,’ an ‘Gadzookses;’<sup>22</sup> but you’re jes’ right to home, an’ you know th’ folks what’s doin’ th’ things, an’ sayin’ th’ things; they’re yer

neighbors, an' you understand why they do 'em. They don't go to cutting' an' slashin' each other with swords on th' 'count o' some kinder idee of honor 't us folks don't understand; but they wrastle some purty hard tussels on th' 'count o' good, ol'-fashioned honesty. Yes, it's th' natcherlism does it."

"Mebbe that is it," admitted Mrs Pickley. "You ain't so took up with their clo'es an' their funny looks, an' th' funny things they do, that you feel jes' like you was to a show or a dime musee."

"That's it percisely," agreed Mr Pickley, enthusiastically; "that's natcherlism. Now the's a man livin' up th' street a ways: I've met him goin' down town almos' ev'ry mornin' fer th' las' three months, an' yet, at this minute, I couldn't swear fer certain ef he had a moustache or not; that's natcherlism."

"Now, s'pose I should meet him to-morrow mornin' with his moustache painted blue. It might be purty an' artistic an' all that, but it's unnatcherl, I ain't usto it; it's strikin' unreal; it's the moustache that int'rests me an' not th' man. That's a histor'cal novel. Then s'pose I met him with one side of his moustache turned up an' t' other side turned down, indicatin' t' he's troubled with idees o' some sort only I can't guess what in tunket he's drivin' at; that's a psythiological novel, like th' one you was a-tryin' to flounder through t' other day; that Holy Well bus'ness."

"'Twan't th' Holy Well," corrected Mrs Pickley, "'twas Th' Sacred Fount."

"Wal, what's th' difference? It might 'a ben a Sinful Waterin' Trought fer all you could git out of it. But that's it, it's natcherlism."

[Having insisted that “natcherlism” is “easy,” Mr Pickley settles down to write his masterpiece.]

M. Nesbit. “The Fountain Pen. By H\*\*\*y J\*\*\*s. (Author of The Sacred Fount, etc.).”  
New-York Daily Tribune. 3 Apr. 1904: 10.

(270 pages omitted.)

And still the indefinably vital conclusion, the more tense inward essence, eluded me.

And still I kept it up:

“It was my sacred fount” –

“Don’t you see that’s just where it is?”

She outdistanced my thought.

“It was my sac” –

“For your sake,” she charmingly said. “The question is what wouldn’t I do?”

This, in its futile subtlety, left us where we were. She was wonderful. To see how she delicately failed to evade the obvious.

“The point of it is,” I began.

“It’s gold, I know,” she splendidly said. “Do you miss it still? And I who see it – oh, but with a clearness!”

“I wish I could grasp it,” I frankly admitted.

She exquisitely sat down. She was prodigious.

“Why,” she said, and her smile was ethereally a paradox, “there it is.” She roundly faced me. “It’s as plain,” she wonderfully said, “as the nose on my face.”

I took her.

“If it’s no plainer than that, dear Lady!”

\*

(400 more pages.)

\*

“You’re of an astuteness,” and I fairly, with the word, scratched my head.

“I do see effects,” she triumphantly set forth. “But the nothing of everything does so desperately bedazzle us. Yet it’s of a simplicity. It’s simply sticking out of you!”

Moved at last, intrinsically, to the depths of my slower nature, I leaned forward.

She was, as always, purely perfectly right. The lost Fountain Pen was sticking out of me, and, as I inclined towards her in that moment of predestined indirectness, it fell from my breast pocket and lay, almost unanswerably, on the floor between us.

“This” – I had to say it – “is too grossly simple.”

“You shouldn’t let it drop, she inimitably said; “one so naturally keeps it up!”

Daniel H. Chamberlain. “To Admirers of Henry James.” New York Times. 5 Aug. 1905: 518.

I have just been reading THE NEW YORK TIMES SATURDAY REVIEW of June 17 – a good deal belated in the mails – in which inter alia, I have found the letter of your

Wheeling, West Va., correspondent. This letter seems to give me a fair occasion to say a few words which I have for long been more than willing to say. I trust that your headline is not so far peremptory as to restrain this correspondent from taking up his pen again far enough to answer one or two queries which I intend here to put.<sup>23</sup>

I am only concerned now with what your correspondent says of Henry James. My interest in Mr James is not new or slight. I was his fellow-student at the Harvard Law School forty years ago, and I have read all he has written until somewhat recently. I stopped reading him for a double reason; first, because his style had become so tortuous and altogether offensive in a literary sense, and next, because his thoughts, if I may so call what is wholly unintelligible, had become too rarefied or esoteric for comprehension, much more for enjoyment.

I have said that I had read him till lately. In point of fact, I drew the line at The Sacred Fount. Patience had then done its perfect work; it could do no more. To quote a phrase from a familiar line of poetry, the volume “dropped from my nerveless hand,”<sup>24</sup> and The Golden Bowl and The Wings of a Dove are and will be sealed books to me unless by possibility some great genius shall hereafter fathom and explain them, or some deep critic, like your West Virginia correspondent, shall translate them into English.

Your correspondent shies rocks at disparagers of James, telling us that they say he can “be read backward and forward with equal results.” So I think, adding only that however read, the results are nil, except a juggle of words. He further accuses us of thinking or saying that James “never cares whether a reader understands him or not.” A true bill again; for plainly, James could write sense and reason if he half tried. The Portrait of a Lady is a genuine classic, clear in style, deft and charming as a story,



or study, as the present cant word is. If, then, James now writes jargon and nonsense, as he indubitably does, it must be either because he has no meaning, or seeks to veil it from his readers by a carefully woven drapery of verbiage.

Your correspondent prophesies, too; thereby indulging in what George Eliot well called “the most gratuitous form of error.”<sup>25</sup> Making an elaborate comparison between the disfavor which Whistler met and that which now meets James, he predicts with rare confidence that James’s triumph will be as has been Whistler’s. Into this realm of the unknown, and at present unknowable, it is not worth our while to enter. To utilize the epigram of the great Sam Patch – “Some things can be done as well as others”<sup>26</sup> – it might be said, “Some people can prophesy as well as others.”

The serious, all-sufficing, all-pervading fault, or vice, of James’s later work is its astonishing, inexplicable lack of intelligibility to ordinary minds, for I aver my firm belief that no man, not even James himself, no, not even your West Virginia critic, can state a meaning, give us a version of The Sacred Fount – I confine myself here to what I have read and reread – which shall make it less than a tissue of meaningless sentences and an affront to literature. I beg your correspondent to so far resume his pen as to attempt to controvert this last statement. Don’t prophesy, especially if you cannot give dates or approximations to dates; confine yourself to what now is, lest I should pass off the stage before the prophecy can be put to test! It is not opinions or beliefs that I want, but proofs. Proofs will satisfy me, will convert me, for I confess not to be of the class of minds of whom Herbert Spencer said, “Proofs will not alter their beliefs.”<sup>27</sup>

Emerson’s third of his well-known rules for reading was, “Never read any books but what you like.”<sup>28</sup> Much more would he have said, “Never read any books but what

you understand.” I am ready to resume reading James whenever I am made acquainted with the meaning of The Sacred Fount.

What well-read reader, reading James’s The Sacred Fount – and I conclude the same must be said of The Golden Bowl and The Wings of a Dove – can help being vividly reminded of John Lyly’s Euphues,<sup>29</sup> which has stood for three centuries and a quarter as the type and acme of vicious style and empty thought, read only as a historical example and warning of literary degeneracy even in “great Eliza’s days.”<sup>31</sup> Lyly has, however, one advantage over James; while his style is of the worst, his meaning, such as it is, is measurably clear.

By all means, let your correspondent, or any other admirer or defender of these later works of James, tell us plainly the grounds of their gay and confident prediction that his critics and detractors will, sooner or later, be brought to grief.

Goldwin Smith has lately said of Browning, “His poetry is philosophy done in verse with Browning societies to interpret it.”<sup>34</sup> I might say of James, His writing of late is intellectual flatulency done in novels which there is no one to interpret.

## NOTES

Thanks are due to Prof. Ian F. A. Bell and Prof. Scott McCracken for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>1</sup>A chronological list of all known reviews of The Sacred Fount, together with other relevant material, will appear in my forthcoming edition of the novel in The Complete Fiction of Henry James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

<sup>2</sup>For the claim that Follett was the first critic to see The Sacred Fount as a parody, see Levy, Perlongo and Margolis.

<sup>3</sup>The caricature is reproduced in Riewald, 224.

<sup>4</sup>On parodies of The Sacred Fount, see Tintner.

<sup>5</sup>A traditional game in which a child guesses which among the participants is concealing a button in the hand.

<sup>6</sup>“A swindling game usually played with three thimbles and a pea which was ostensibly placed under one of them” (OED).

<sup>7</sup>George Lafayette Fox (1825–77), the American clown.

<sup>8</sup>Polonius asks his question in Hamlet II. ii. Hamlet’s reply is: “Words, words, words.”

<sup>9</sup>Joseph Edgar Chamberlin’s review appeared in the Boston Evening Transcript on 13 Feb. 1901 (see Hayes 339–41).

<sup>10</sup>MSF 42, 74, 166.

<sup>11</sup>MSF 8, 20, 126 (quotation modified).

<sup>12</sup>MSF 276.

<sup>13</sup>Howells wrote a column entitled “The Editor’s Easy Chair” in Harper’s Monthly Magazine. He discussed The Soft Side in the December 1900 issue but did not say that James had been “finding himself.”

<sup>14</sup>The novel contains no such phrase as the “ineptitude of ecstasy.”

<sup>15</sup>MSF 65.

<sup>16</sup>The “blow” which Mrs Brissenden holds back but eventually (without “quavering”) delivers is that the narrator builds “houses of cards” (MSF 260).

<sup>17</sup>Penelope is thinking above all of Theodore Roosevelt’s speech in Chicago on 10 Apr. 1899: “I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life.”

<sup>18</sup>The trade name of a poison.

<sup>19</sup>“‘What’s the use’ ... turn on the gas:” a clear reference to the final chapter of Theodore Dreiser’s Sister Carrie, in which George Hurstwood commits suicide in a Bowery boarding house.

<sup>20</sup>In a New York Times article of 1892, Samuel Ward McAllister listed the four hundred most influential people in New York.

<sup>21</sup>Eben Holden: A Tale of the North Country (1900) was a bestselling novel by Irving Bacheller, the journalist and colleague of Stephen Crane. David Harum: A Story of American Life (1899) was a bestselling novel by Edward Noyes Westcott.

<sup>22</sup>Mr Pickley appears to be thinking of historical adventure novels such as The Prisoner of Zenda (1894) by Anthony Hope or The Castle Inn (1898) by Stanley J. Weyman. In 1895, Robert Bridges compared modern American fiction “saturated with reality” to the “wave of romance” associated with Weyman and Hope, in which blood is shed “in a gentlemanly way with plenty of ‘gadzooks’ ... to accompany it” (67–68).

<sup>23</sup>Chamberlain wrote from London, hence the delay in receiving the *New York Times*. He was responding to a letter from H. M. Hall of Wheeling, West Virginia, published on 17 June 1905. Hall was capable of joking about the difficulties of later James, referring to the case of a woman who spoke three languages fluently – “French, New Thought, and Henry James.” But he was clear that The Sacred Fount stood alongside The Ambassadors, The Wings of the Dove and The Golden Bowl as an instance of American “artistic distinction.” The *New York Times* headline referred to by Chamberlain ran thus: “The West Virginia Critic Makes a Few More Remarks About Literary Decadence and Then Lays Down His Pen.” In spite of Chamberlain’s invitation, Hall did not answer Chamberlain’s “queries” directly. He did, however, refer to the “cocksure wrath” of James’s detractors in a subsequent letter (*New York Times*, 10 March 1906).

<sup>24</sup>A poeticism.

<sup>25</sup>Chamberlain quotes Middlemarch: “Among all forms of mistake, prophecy is the most gratuitous” (chapter 10).

<sup>26</sup>The understated catchphrase of the daredevil Sam Patch (1799–1829), known as the “Yankee Leaper.”

<sup>27</sup>A somewhat inaccurate quotation. In “The Development Hypothesis” (1852), Spencer wrote, of those who opposed evolutionary theory, that “they demand the most rigorous proof of any adverse belief, but assume that their own needs none” (377).

<sup>28</sup>A reference to Emerson’s essay “Books,” in Society and Solitude (1870).

<sup>29</sup>John Lyly’s prose romance Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit (1579) was known for its stylistic refinement.

<sup>30</sup>A poeticism.

<sup>31</sup>The remark occurs in a 1904 essay in which Smith explains why the poems of Browning “do not give me pleasure of that sort which it is supposed to be the special function of poetry to give” (40).

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